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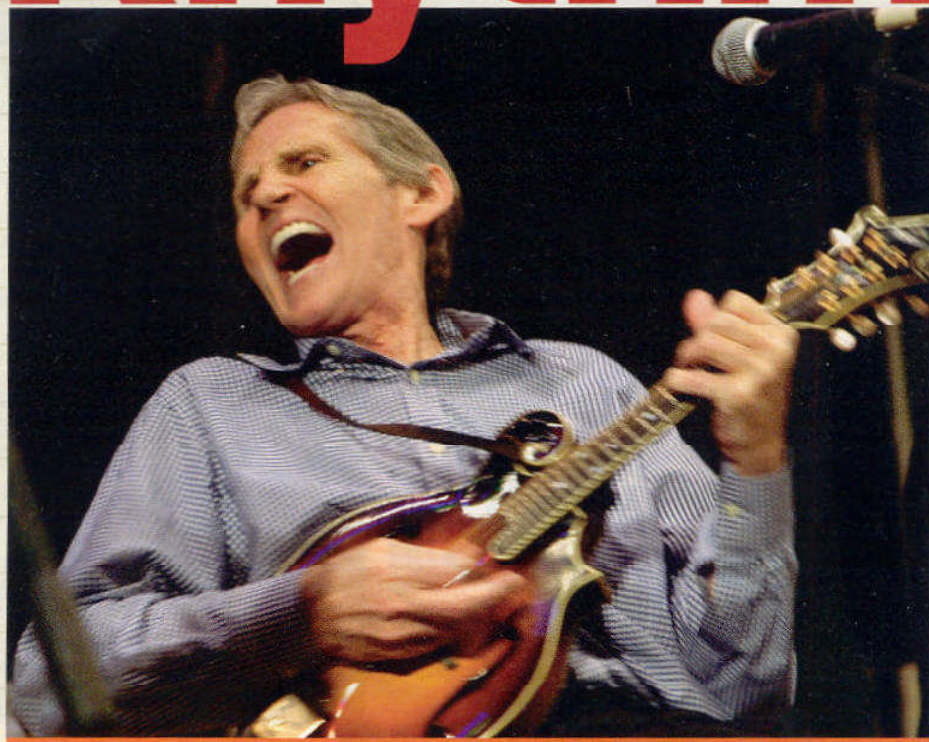
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# Reading, Writing & Rhythm



Levon Helm — one-time drummer for the rock group The Band and a Woodstock resident — uses music to reach out to local students

by Kay Cordtz   Photographs by Thomas Moore





School of rock: Levon Helm (left) and protégé Myles Mancuso

Last May, Onteora High School in Boiceville held a spring social event that perhaps inspired more memories than the prom. On a Saturday night, the Harry Simon Auditorium fairly levitated with the jumping and jiving of hundreds of students, parents and teachers as they sang along to the soulful sounds of friend and neighbor Levon Helm — the legendary drummer of the rock group The Band — and several other top-drawer musicians. The group ran through a set of blues standards and a few of Helm's own hits, watching as the seats emptied and the dance floor filled. Before long, entire families — from tiny children to grandparents — were grooving in front of the stage.

"Man, it sure was fun," Helm remembers. "If only the audience enjoyed it half as much as we did."

Helm, who lives 10 miles down the road in Woodstock, came not only to entertain, but also to raise money. Onteora's music program was a finalist for Grammy Signature status, which is awarded to schools that are committed to excellence in music education. But like many school districts around the state, Onteora has found it increasingly difficult to fund the program fully. Instruments are old and in disrepair, and the once-splendid auditorium has missing seats and dilapidated stage equipment.

Helm became aware of the situation through his manager, an Onteora graduate. He promised to play a benefit concert, and on this night he came through. More than \$5,000 was raised; equally important, a powerful partnership was born.

A few weeks after the benefit, several dozen kids returned the favor when the Onteora Jazz Ensemble entertained guests at a barbecue marking Levon Helm Day in Woodstock. The 20-piece band played an ambitious set of pieces from Earth, Wind and Fire to traditional jazz standards. Throughout their show, and the standing ovation and encore that followed, Helm stood quietly in the background, beaming like a proud parent. "The crowd enjoyed it so much, you didn't want it to stop," he said later. "It's the most fun you can have, watching those kids."





**T**he Onteora marching band's drum line has been practicing at Helm's studio. He has pledged to attend their shows and competitions this fall. "The kids have been so honored to be rehearsing at Levon's studio," bandmaster Steven Murphy said. "He really wants to help them. He knows that they are the musical future of this area."

Music has been a big part of Helm's life since his boyhood in the cotton-growing country of eastern Arkansas, where it was as inescapable as any force of nature. But it wasn't part of the school curriculum.

"I would have enjoyed school a lot more if we'd had some real music classes," he said. "There were talent shows and school plays and we would encourage each other to sing and act, but it was more of a social thing. There were no instruments around, and any one-on-one you had to hunt down for yourself. What we did have was the radio station doing a live show every day. That's where I first started hearing bands."

The King Biscuit Time radio show featuring blues legend Sonny Boy Williamson broadcast from a station in nearby Helena. The area was a magnet for other great musical acts of the time, who played on the back of flatbed trucks and at tent shows. Helm's affection for blues music springs from those shows.

Having called Ulster County home for the past four decades, Helm is passionate about playing music, and wants students to share that passion. He acts as a friend and mentor to a pair of 10-year-olds: Myles Mancuso of Lagrangeville in Dutchess County, and Tyler Hough of Connellsville, Pennsylvania. Mancuso, a prodigy who plays bass, drums, piano, and guitar, sat in with Helm's band at the Onteora show.

"Levon inspired me to be a multi-instrumentalist, because he's one," the sharply dressed sixth-grader said later. "I've learned that music isn't hard or work... it's easy and fun."



Hudson Valley. Last year, they participated in a Blues in the Schools pilot project at Dutchess County's John Jay High School in Hopewell Junction. The project is designed to

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The Onteora benefit was not the first time Helm and his band have contributed their talents to help music education in the



Blues brothers: Little Sammy Davis, left, jams with Mancuso. Below: Helm (center) with some of Onteora's music students

educate students about the connections between culture, history, and language. A highlight of the program was the band's performance before an enthusiastic audience of students, many of them blues novices. Helm and bluesman Little Sammy Davis later took part in a Q&A session with some of the students.

Then-assistant principal Rochelle Pyne oversaw the program, which also included lesson plans in subjects like business math, in which students would put together a budget for a touring band. "The music program at John Jay is good, but traditional," Pyne says. "The teachers were thrilled to be part of an interdisciplinary approach."

Pyne and Helm would like to expand the program, and have been deluged with requests from area schools that would like to participate. But further development of the program will require outside financial support to pay participants and establish master musician residencies.

"Residencies are the best way to promote education," Pyne said. "When professional musicians interact with students, something very exciting happens."

Helm hopes that his efforts will increase support for school music programs. But he's not content to sit back and wait. Helm and Murphy are hatching plans to take their bands on the road together, playing at other high schools in the Valley to benefit financially strapped music programs.

"Maybe we can put a temporary fix on each one of those music departments," Helm said. "And it will give the kids in the band the experience of a little mini-tour."

Well aware of the studies linking music education to academic success and lower drug abuse rates, Helm knows there are other advantages as well. "Socially, it means a lot," he says. "It gives even the quiet kids that chance to enjoy and maybe learn to express themselves musically, something we all should have. Right now, in the prime of their school years, there's a real value to helping them to build friendships and gain confidence in their own playing abilities. It can be so important to their lives, and it only takes a little bit of effort on our part to make it happen." ■